Lessons

10 Things You Gotta Do to Play Like STEVE MORSE

BY JESSE GRESS

PICTURE IF YOU WILL: YOU'VE studied classical guitar, you founded the Dixie Dregs, you front your own trio, you're in Deep Purple, and you're a licensed commercial jet pilot. Welcome to the Steve Morse Zone, where the musical and real worlds routinely collide. Name another guitarist who can go head-to-head with legends and chopmeisters as diverse as Albert Lee, Eric Johnson, John McLaughlin, Al Di Meola, Paco DeLucia, Liona Boyd, and Edward Van Halen. And who else literally flies their band to gigs? Voted Best Overall Guitarist by *GP* readers for five straight

FRANK WHITE

STEVE MORSE

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years between 1982 and 1986, Steve Morse embodies the rugged American individualist: a self-made, model musician who inspires immediate admiration and is 100 percent committed to getting the job—*any* job—done right.

Inspired primarily by the original Mahavishnu Orchestra, but also informed by earlier influences like the Yardbirds, Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page, Jimi Hendrix, and the Allman Brothers Band (as well as country gentleman Chet Atkins), Morse formed the Dixie Dregs (which sported the same instrumentation as the M.O.) in 1975 while studying classical guitar with Juan Mercadel at the University of Miami. The band, which shortened its name in 1980, and originally included the late T. Lavitz on keyboards, violinist Allen Sloan, bassist Andy West, and drummer Rod Morgenstein, straddled the lines between rock, jazz, funk, country, and classical styles, and wowed audiences with its one-of-a-kind blend of virtuosity and earthiness for the better part of a decade. (The Dregs reformed in the early '90s with ex-Mahavishnu violinist Jerry Goodman and bassist-extraordinaire Dave LaRue on board.) Newcomers will want to catch up on *Free Fall* (1977), *What If* (1978), *Night of the Living Dregs* (1979), *Unsung Heroes* (1981), and *Industry Standard* (1982).

Between Dregs incarnations, Morse recorded two groundbreaking instrumental solo albums—*The Introduction* (1984) and *Stand Up* (1985)—and soon after started the Steve Morse Band with LaRue and powerhouse drummer Van Romaine. Morse also joined a reformed Kansas between 1986 and 1988, and in 1987 he took a hiatus from touring to fly commercial jets and write new material for 1989's *High Tension Wires*, paving the way for the S.M.B.'s *Southern Steel* (1991) and *Coast to Coast* (1992). In 1996, Morse became a member of Deep Purple, a surprisingly cool collaboration that continues to this day, harmoniously co-existing alongside his ongoing work with both the Dregs and the Steve Morse Band.

Why should we care? Simply put, studying Steve Morse's music will make you a better musician. There's no way around it, so roll up your sleeves and let's dig in. But first, you've gotta...

1 CREATE A MONSTER

Back in the days when artist endorsements were more rare than hen's teeth, Steve Morse literally took matters into his own hands and assembled his own custom ax. Pieced together from parts that included a late-'60s Fender Stratocaster neck with a rosewood fingerboard, a blonde Telecaster body, and no less than five pickups—two humbuckers and two single-coils configured HSSH, plus a hexaphonic synth driver—this iconic "Frankentele" paired with an Ampeg V4 head and two Fender speaker cabinets (each sporting two 12" JBLs) became Morse's go-to rig for over a decade. Fast-forward to more recent times and you'll find Morse playing his signature Music Man/Ernie Ball guitars (both the original '86 and current Y2D models) through Engl Steve Morse E656 programmable amps and Engl 4x12 cabs, both of which he heartily endorses. During the '80s, Morse ran his signal through a plethora of stompboxes and rackmounted processors, including a Cry Baby wah, Lexicon PCM-41 and Prime Time digital delays, a Boss Chorus, Eventide Harmonizer, and DeArmond and Sho-Bud volume pedals. During the next decade, he supplemented his rack with a Peavey Graphic EQ and LXP-1 or LXP-5 reverb units, and his floorboard with a T.C. Electronic booster and Ernie Ball volume pedals. Morse's current rig features a Boss OC-3 octave divider and two Electro-Harmonix Deluxe Memory Man delay units. His custom pedalboard houses three Ernie Ball volume pedals used to blend effects and adjust levels, and sports buffered switchable outputs that can be routed to multiple amps.

2 COMPOSE YOURSELF

Morse's anything-worth-doing-is-worth-doing-well philosophy seems to permeate everything the guy does. From composing almost all of the music for the Dregs and the Steve Morse Band and piloting airplanes to studying classical guitar and rocking the house with Deep Purple, one gets the picture that Morse would be as committed to serving a fast-food burger as he is to writing, recording, and performing music. And that's a good thing. Let's take that attitude to heart and do some half-steppin'!

3 CHROMATICIZE IT

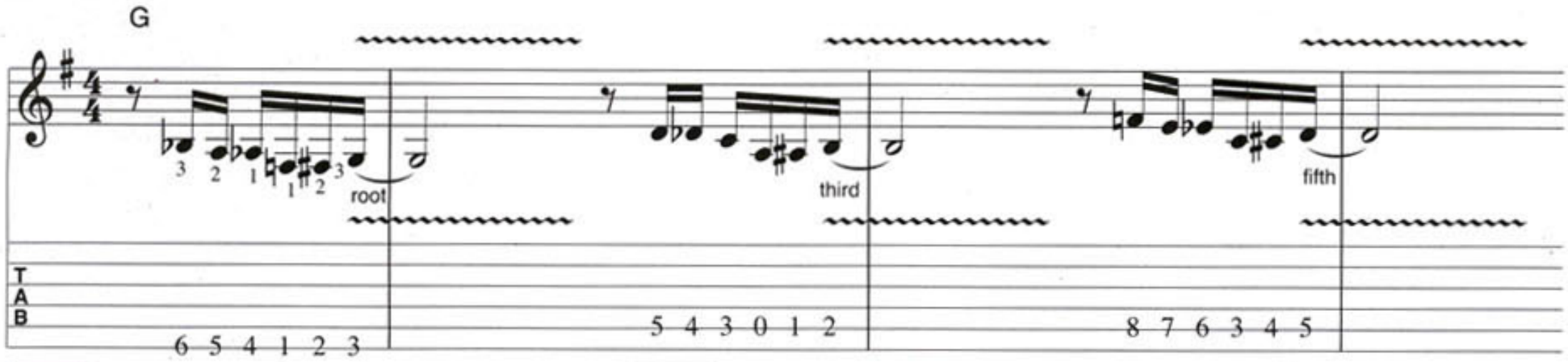
Well versed in pentatonic blues-rock and country vocabularies, Morse has created a signature style and furthered the vernacular of both genres by incorporating a healthy dose of chromatic motion into his single-note lines. For instance, **Ex. 1a** illustrates how Morse might use triple chromatic approaches from both directions to target each tone of a *G* major triad. (Tip: These work anywhere on the fretboard and can easily be adapted to minor chords.) Keep in mind that you probably wouldn't want to run all three motifs in succession—that's too predictable. Try using each one to launch another idea. Rhythmic placement, i.e. starting on the *and* of beat three, is also key. The *G7*-based run shown in **Ex. 1b** blends a single *D#* chromatic passing tone into an otherwise *G* Dorian line. Turning the lick around on the half-step inherent to the scale creates the impression of more chromaticism than what is actually involved. The same line moves east by a half beat in **Ex. 1c**, illustrating how this type of rhythmic displacement can be used to get more mileage out of any lick. Originally conceived over a *D* root, the chromatic action in **Ex. 1d** works well with *D5*, *Dm7*, *D7#9*, as well as *G7*. End it with either *A* or *F* on beat four. The same line gets a rhythmic nudge to the and of beat one in **Ex. 1e**. Morse is also fond of powerful, low-register chromatic-laced ensemble figures, such as the one paraphrased in **Ex. 1f**. Note the double-time feel and shades of Jimi.

4 PUT A LITTLE COUNTRY IN YOUR PROG

While a good chunk of Morse's compositions echo the musical majesty of the original Mahavishnu Orchestra, there has always been a strong country element present throughout the Dregs and solo Morse catalogs, and you won't find a finer example of Morse's formidable country chops than "General Lee" (from *The Introduction*), which tributes master chicken picker and pal Albert Lee. **Ex. 2a** shows the song's *A*-based intro, which creates a two-guitar effect by weaving together a bass figure with double-stopped sixths. (Note the chromatic slide in bar 1 and the bent tritone in bar 2.) Try it hybrid-style as

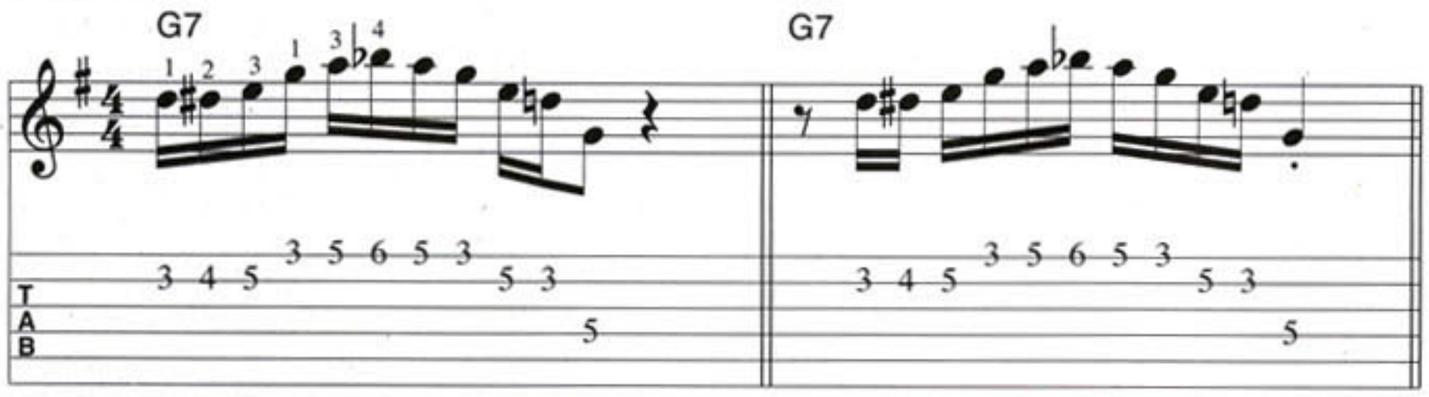
Ex. 1a

♩ = 140-168



Ex. 1b

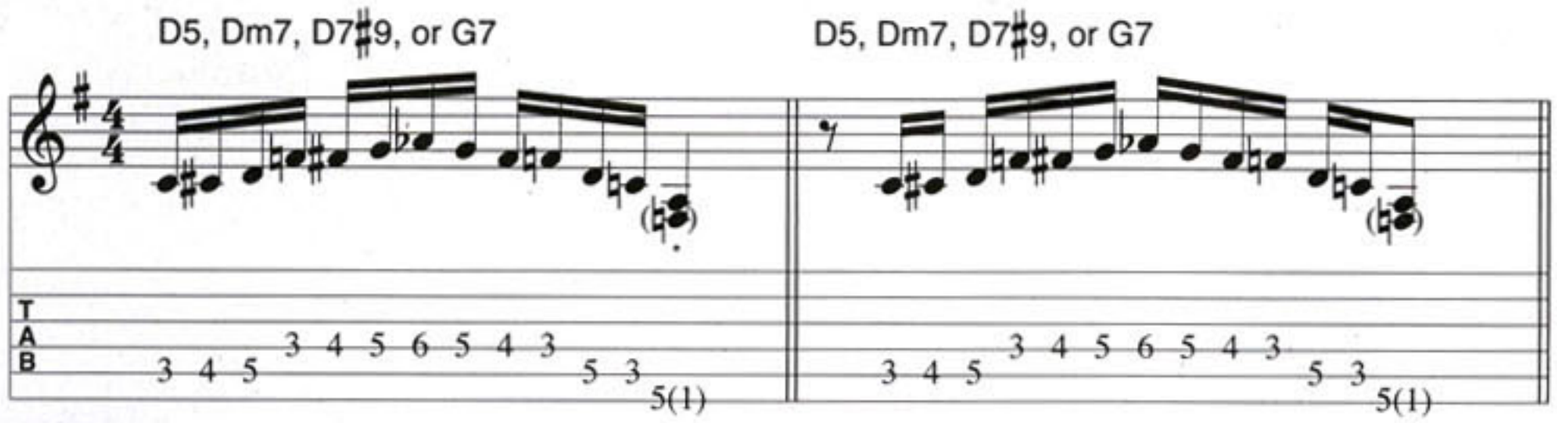
♩ = 140-168



Ex. 1c

Ex. 1d

♩ = 140-168



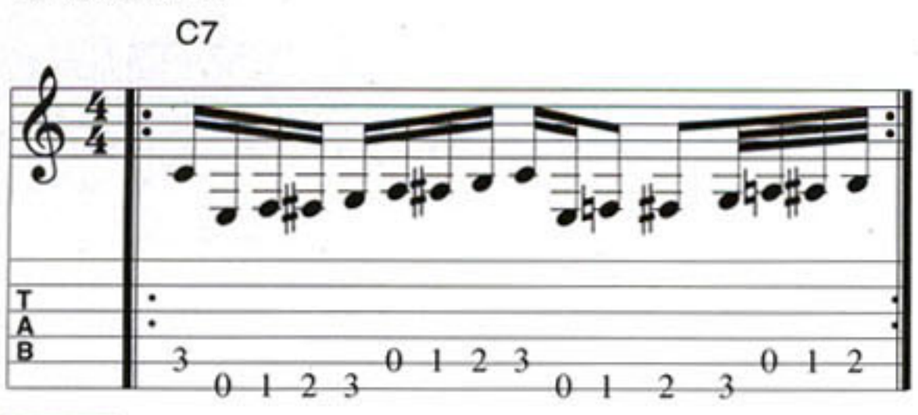
Ex. 1e

*Play A or F

Ex. 1f

♩ = ca. 84

w/Double-time feel

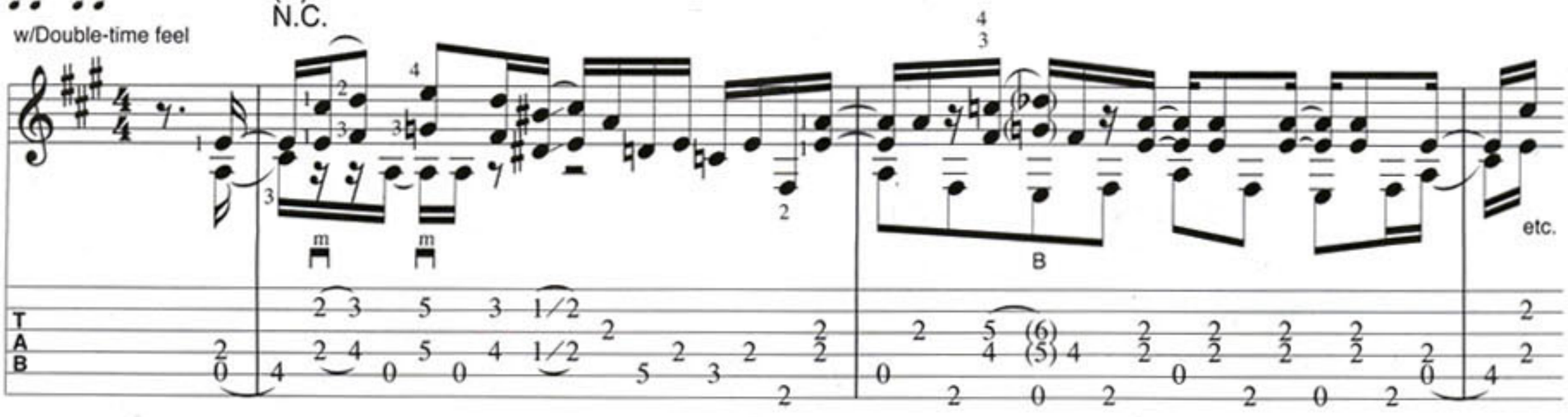


Ex. 2a

♩ = ca. 96

♫ = ♫ (3)

w/Double-time feel



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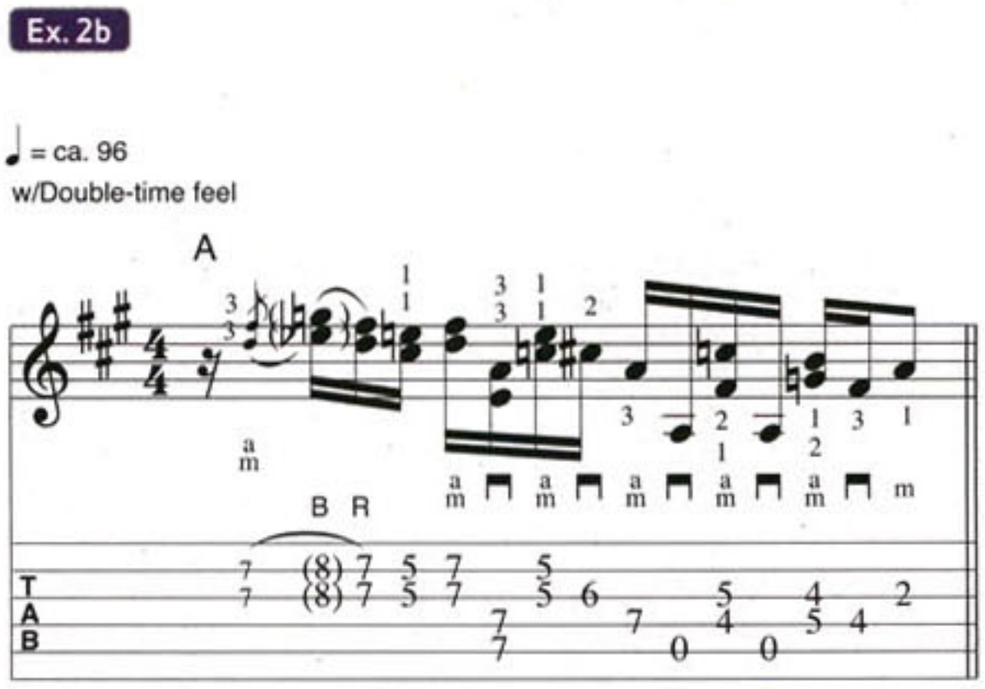
notated, or lose the pick and go naked. Don't be intimidated by the opposing stemming in the notation—this essentially reads as a four-to-the-beat, straight sixteenth-note run split between lower and upper registers. The cool, *A*-based fragment illustrated in **Ex. 2b** begins on the second sixteenth of beat one with a flurry of bent and unbent double-stops, and ends with a clever sequence of converging intervals. Designed for a tonic *G* chord, **Ex. 2c** utilizes similar double-stops, plus some melodic sleight-of-hand courtesy of a pair of sixteenth-note triplets. Still in *G*, **Ex. 2d** features banjo-like phrasing during the first two beats, and the very same triple-chromatic approach to *B* (the 3 of *G*) we learned back in Ex. 1a. Yee haw! Moving to *D*, **Ex. 2e** illustrates a short phrase built around a pedal-steel-style held bend and melodic release. Finally, **Ex. 2f** shows off Morse's Chet Atkins-style banjo rolls (bar 1) and oblique, open-string pull-offs (bar 2) played over *G* and *F*, respectively. On the flip side of the coin, you've gotta...

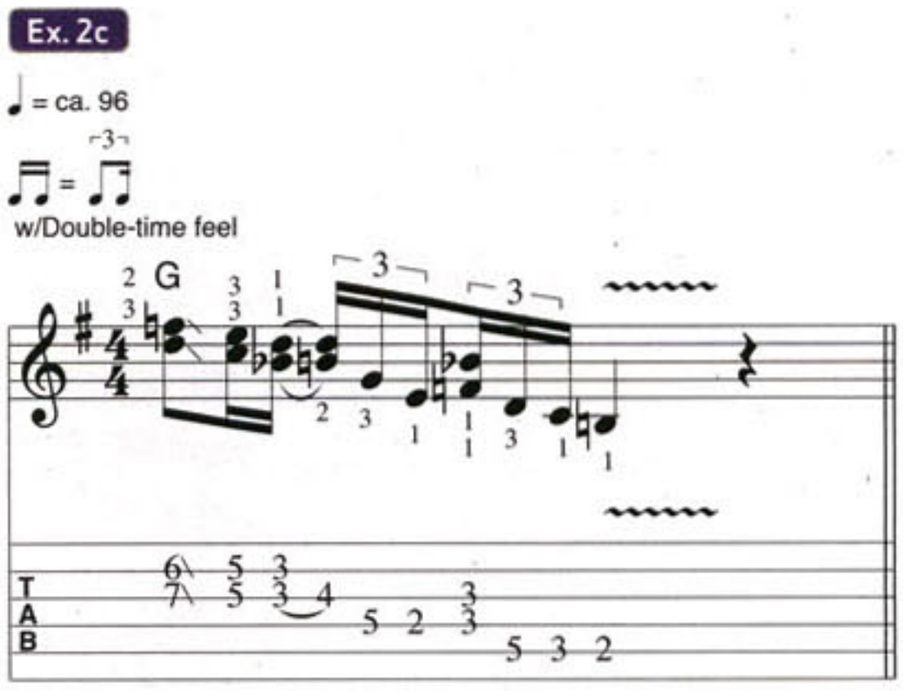
5 PUT A LITTLE PROG IN YOUR COUNTRY

Conversely, it's not unusual for Morse to pepper a country solo with prog-ish lines like the ones in **Examples 3a** and **3b**. The former is *A*-based, played in seventeenth position, and emphasizes the 6 (*F♯*) where we might normally expect to hear a ♭7 (*G*), while the latter ventures outside its *D* tonality with a chromatic pickup and thrice repeated 6/8

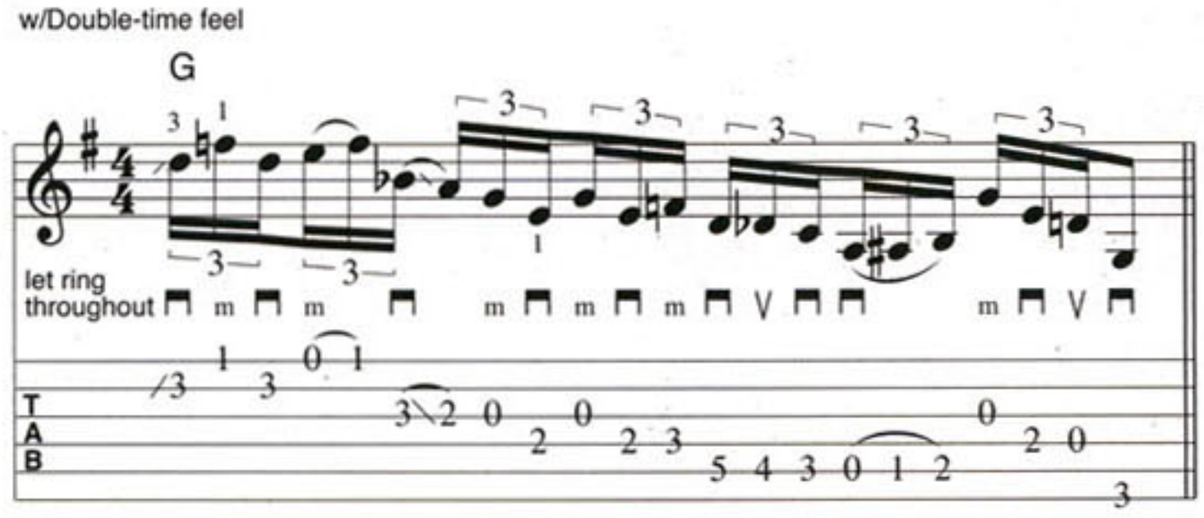
Ex. 2b



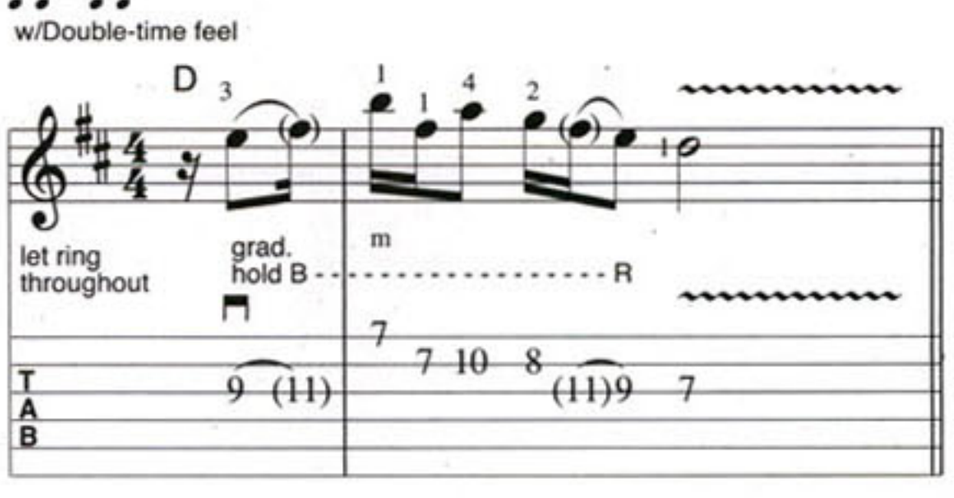
Ex. 2c



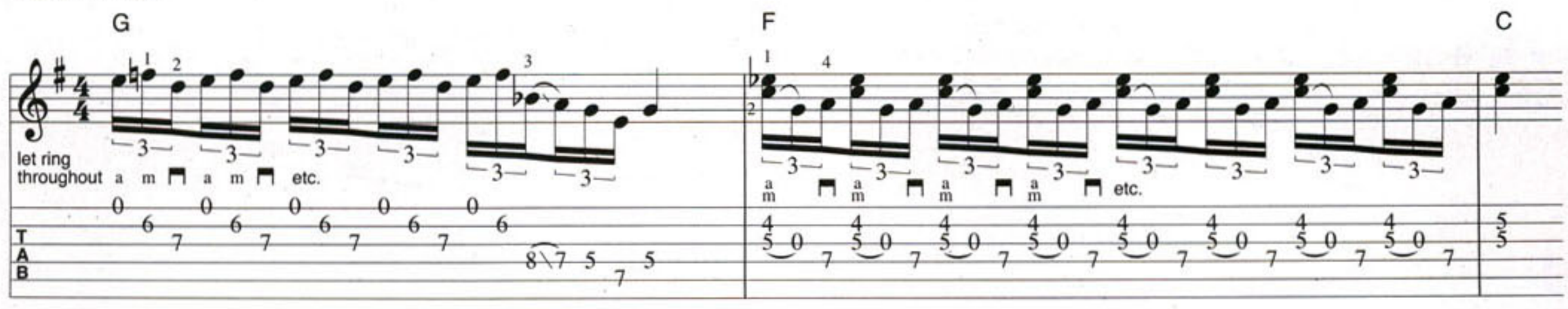
Ex. 2d



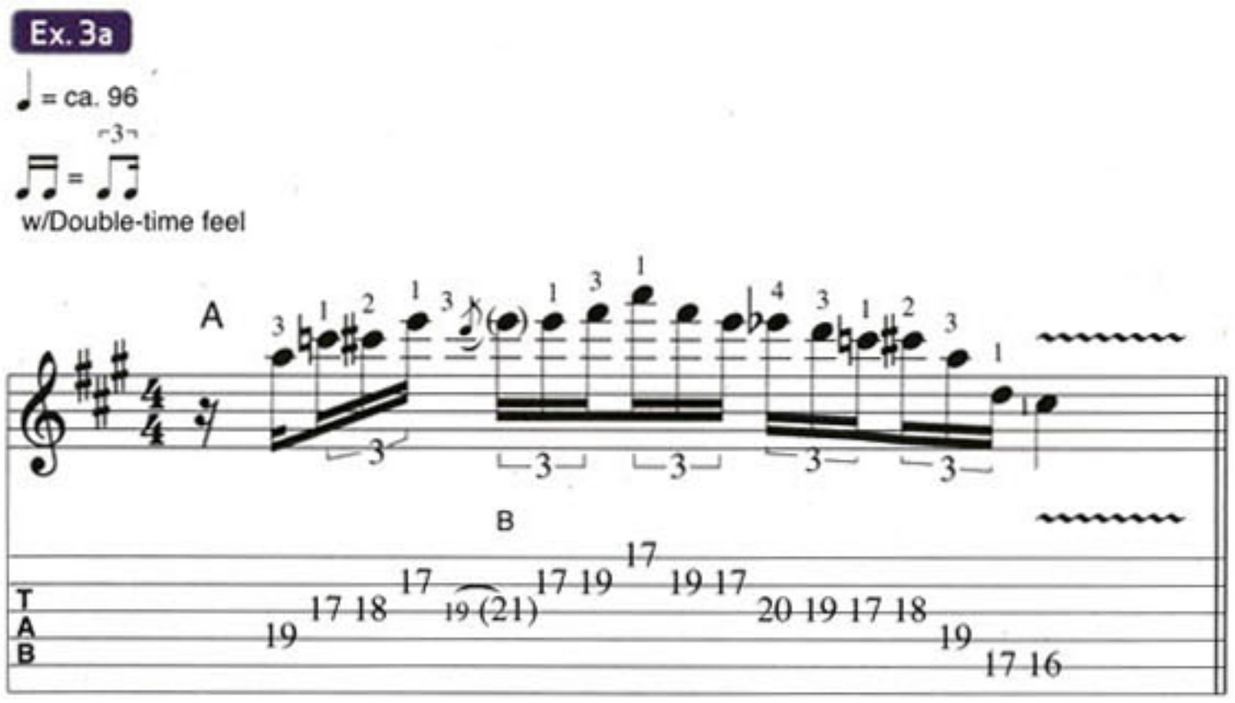
Ex. 2e



Ex. 2f

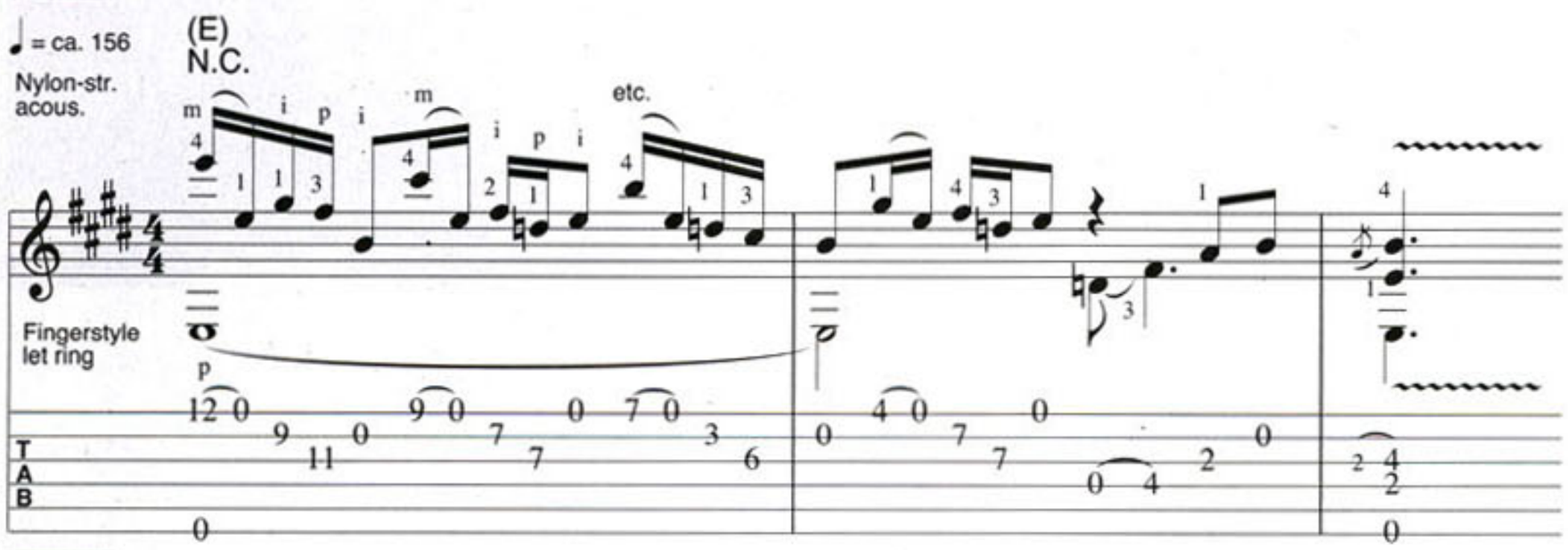


Ex. 3a

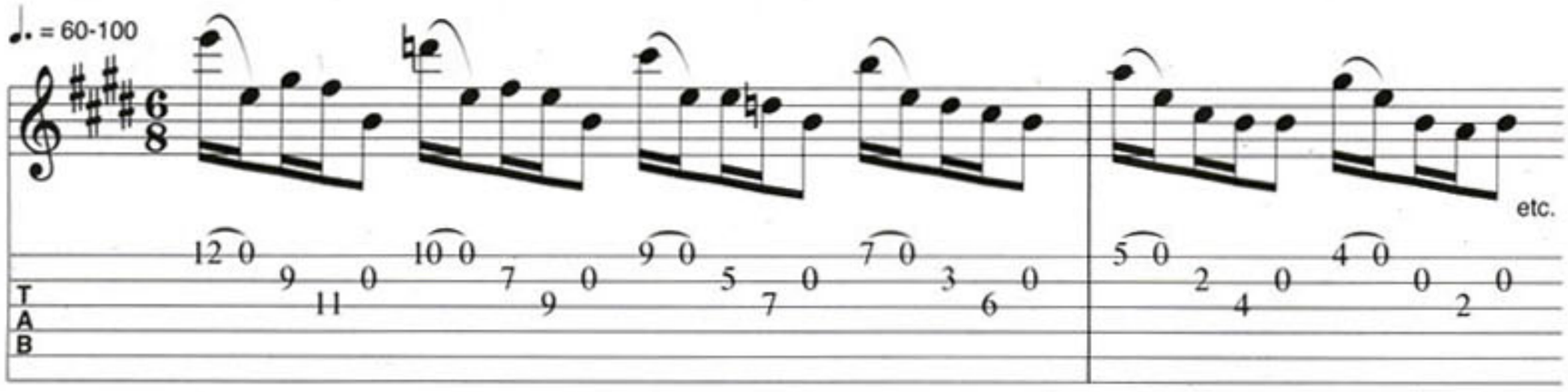


Ex. 3b

Ex. 4



Ex. 5a



hemiola rhythm motif that includes a ♭9 (*E*♭) and emphasis on the ♯4/♭5 in the first hemiola, a *D* blues phrase embellished with the 6 (*B*) in the second one, and a straight *D* pentatonic move in the partially completed third one. Suss the shape of each one-and-a-half-beat phrase and you'll have it down in no time.

6 GO FOR BAROQUE

Classical and Baroque period music also loom large in Morse's oeuvre, and the *E* Mixolydian-based, nylon-string acoustic intro to "Flat Baroque" (from *Coast to Coast*) notated in **Ex. 4** crams several nifty, lute-like compositional techniques into just two bars. Note how the figure consists of a six-note, 6/8 hemiola that utilizes four descending diatonic motifs, each interspersed first with open *E*, and then alternating open *B* and *E* pedal tones. Have at it fingerstyle. This figure strikes me as especially ripe for picking, so let's use it to...

7 CULTIVATE FRESH IDEAS FROM SEED

If you've been keeping up with Ten Things, you may have noticed a recent trend towards extrapolating multiple lines from a single source. I dig this concept because it promotes and expands harmonic awareness—a major key to expanding your musical vocabulary—and offers a lot of bang for the buck, so let's apply it to our next four examples. (This type of "lick mining" was the basis for much of last month's Steve Vai feature.) Here, we've extracted each 6/8 hemiola from Ex. 4—two pairs of sixteenths, plus one eighth-note—and converted it to a diatonically voice-led, ascending or descending 12/8 sequence based on the original starting point. We begin the proceedings in **Ex. 5a** by moving each fretted note of the first motif down one diatonic

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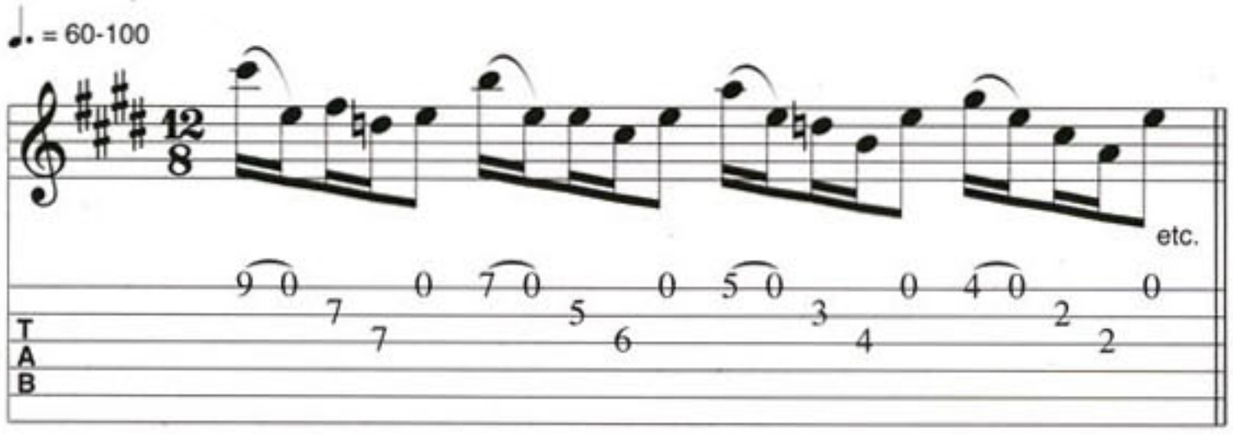
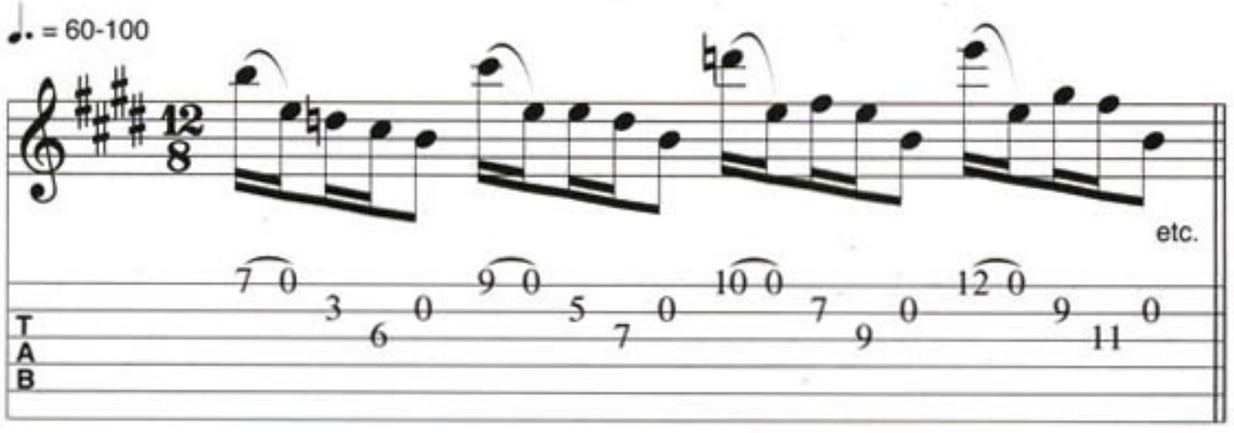
scale step. (Remember, we're in *E* Mixolydian, relative to the key of *A*: *E, F♯, G♯, A, B, C♯, D*.) **Examples 5b** through **5d** follow suit drawing from the second and third motifs from Ex. 4. (Go beyond the call of duty and explore different rhythmic subsets for each 6/8 grouping: two sixteenths/one eighth/two sixteenths, one sixteenth/one eighth/three sixteenths, etc.) Work it hard and have a blast—I guarantee you'll find something new!

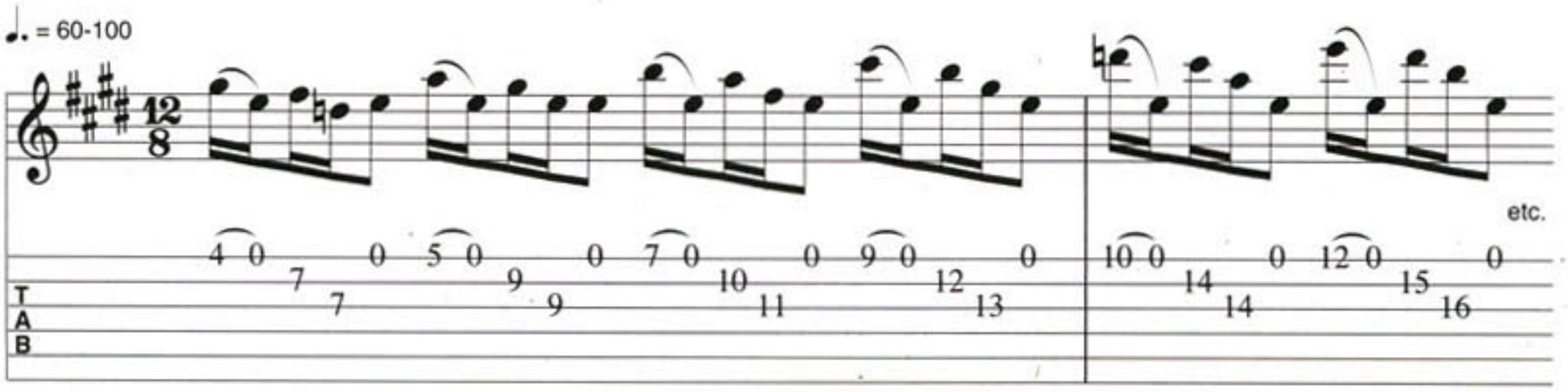
Ex. 5b



Ex. 5c



Ex. 5d

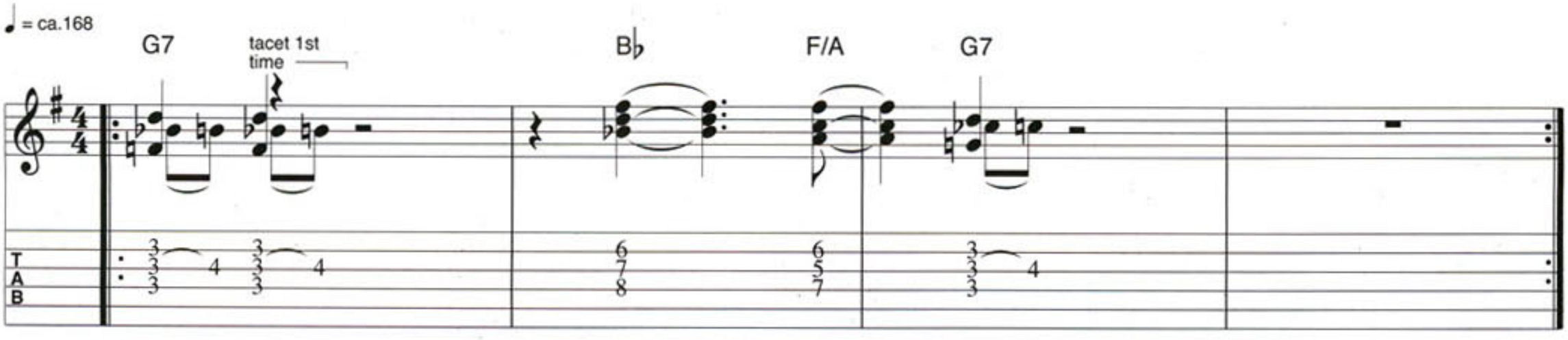


8 GO CRUISIN' WITH YOUR BUDS

Like many Morse compositions, the Dregs' "Cruise Control" (from *Free Fall*), which still stands as the ultimate driving song, sports several diverse stylistic elements, including a rhythmically hammered, *Gm7*-to-*G7*, I-chord move reminiscent of "Funk 49"-era James Gang (bars 1 and 3), syncopated slash chords that superimpose *B♭* and *F/A* triads over a pedal *G* bass line (bar 2), and Mahavishnu-style ensemble fills in between. (More on those in a minute.) Check it out: The core of the song is built around the deceptively simple rhythm figure notated in **Ex. 6a**. (Be sure to include the second *Gm7*-to-*G7* hits on the repeat.)

JAY BLAKESBERG

Ex. 6a



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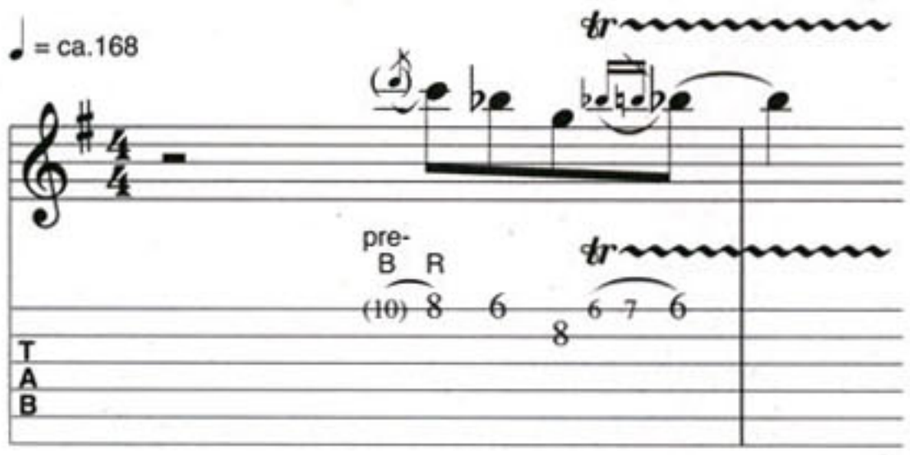
Now, let's construct the melody in modular form. **Examples 6b** through **6d** depict Morse's highly Beck-influenced, *G* Mixolydian melody, which is meticulously phrased in the spaces between Ex. 6a's chordal stabs. Drop Ex. 6b into the last two beats of bar 1 of Ex. 6a, Ex. 6c into bars 3 and 4, and Ex. 6d into bar 5, and a good time will be had by all!

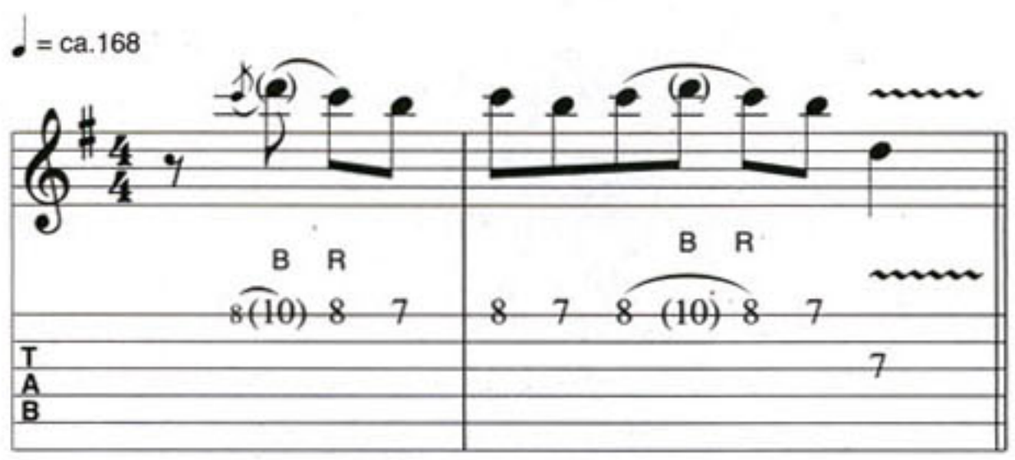
9 FILL 'ER UP

Morse and company also inject a number of ripping ensemble fills in the spaces between chordal hits in Ex. 6's rhythm figure. Using Ex. 6a's rhythm figure as a template, drop **Ex. 7a**'s fiddle-y fill into bar 1, **Ex. 7b**'s Beck-meets-Mahavishnu-isms (all played from a single *D* note!) into bars 3 and 4, and either **Ex. 7c**'s honky-tonk chromatic moves or the intervallic designs of **Ex. 7d** into bar 8, and you'll have the bulk of the "Cruise Control" intro and A-section under your fingers. But there's always more. You've gotta keep it unpredictable, and...

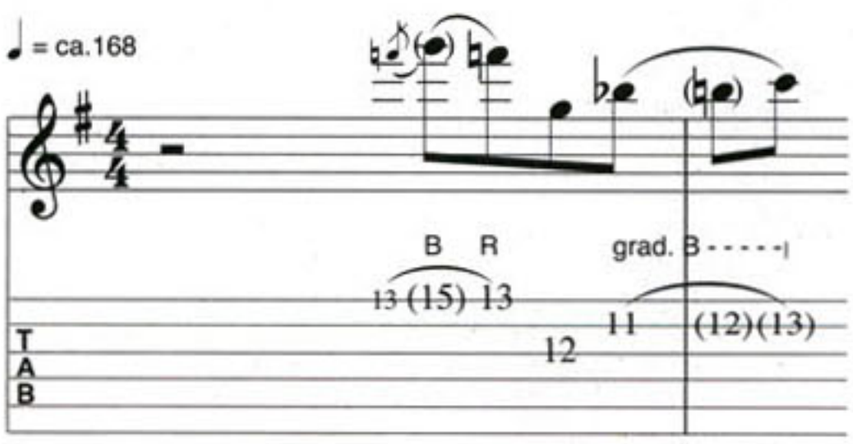
Ex. 6b



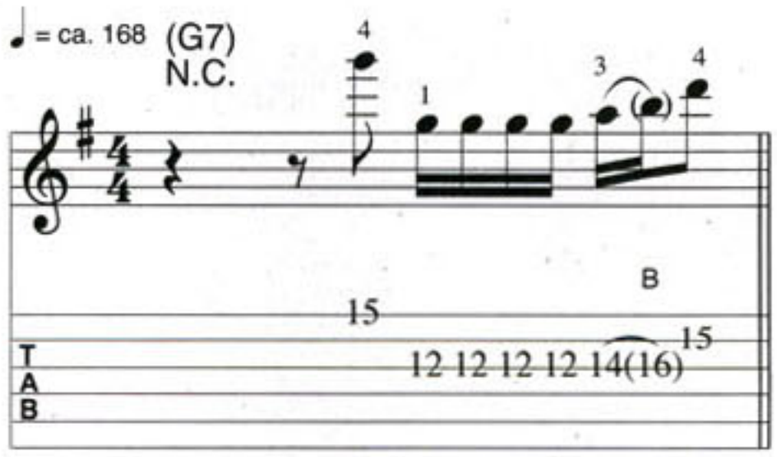
Ex. 6c



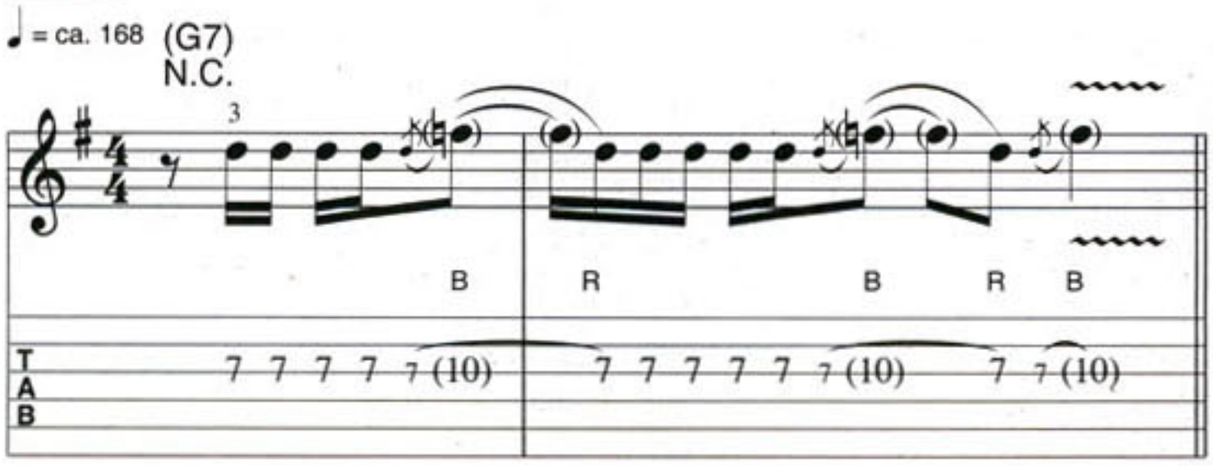
Ex. 6d



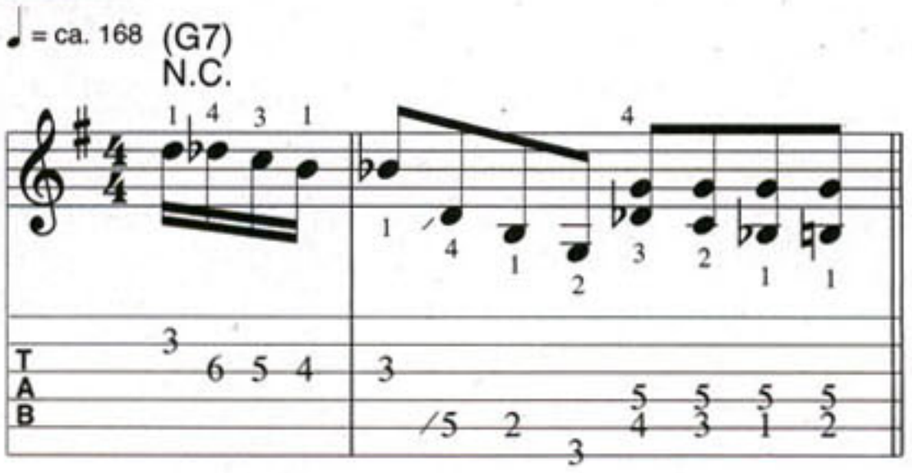
Ex. 7a



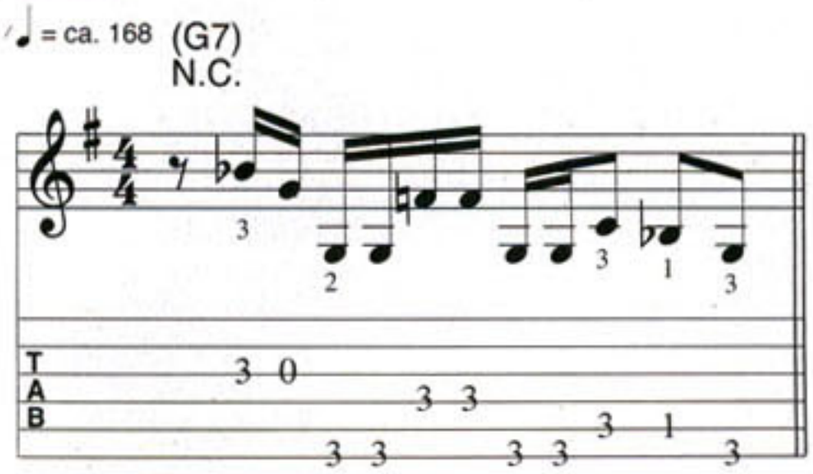
Ex. 7b



Ex. 7c



Ex. 7d



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- Morse gives a private lesson.
- "General Lee"!
- Morse goes cruisin'.

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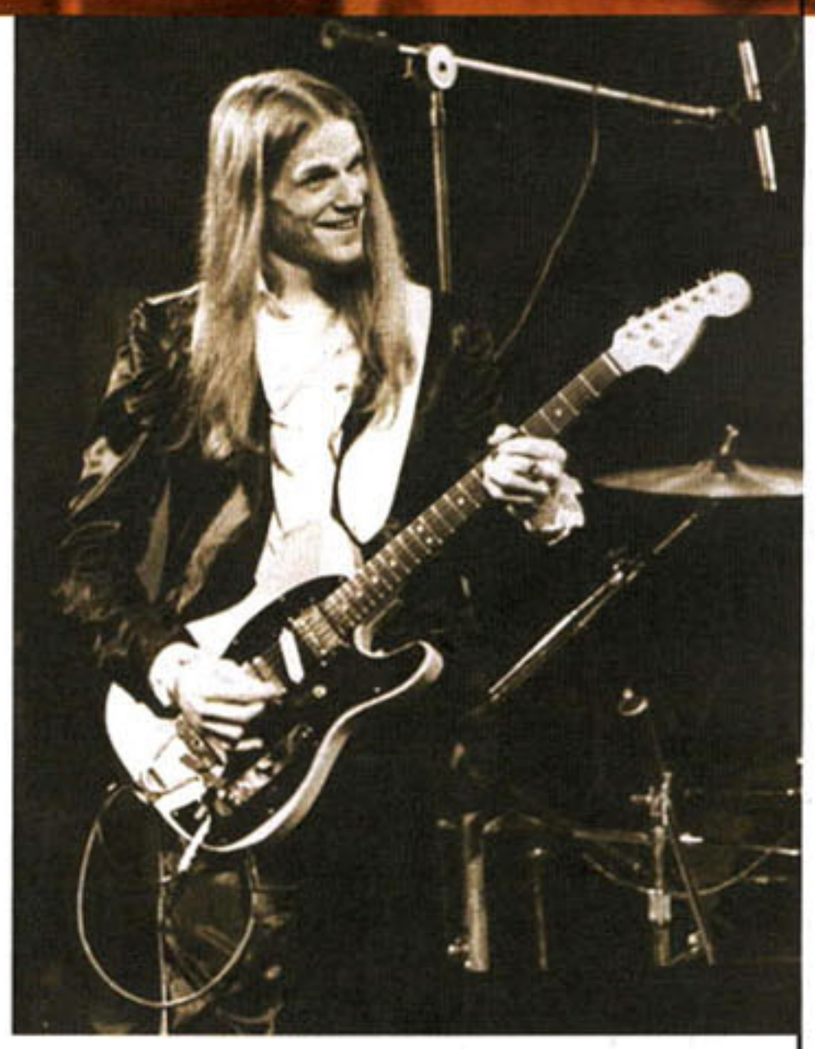
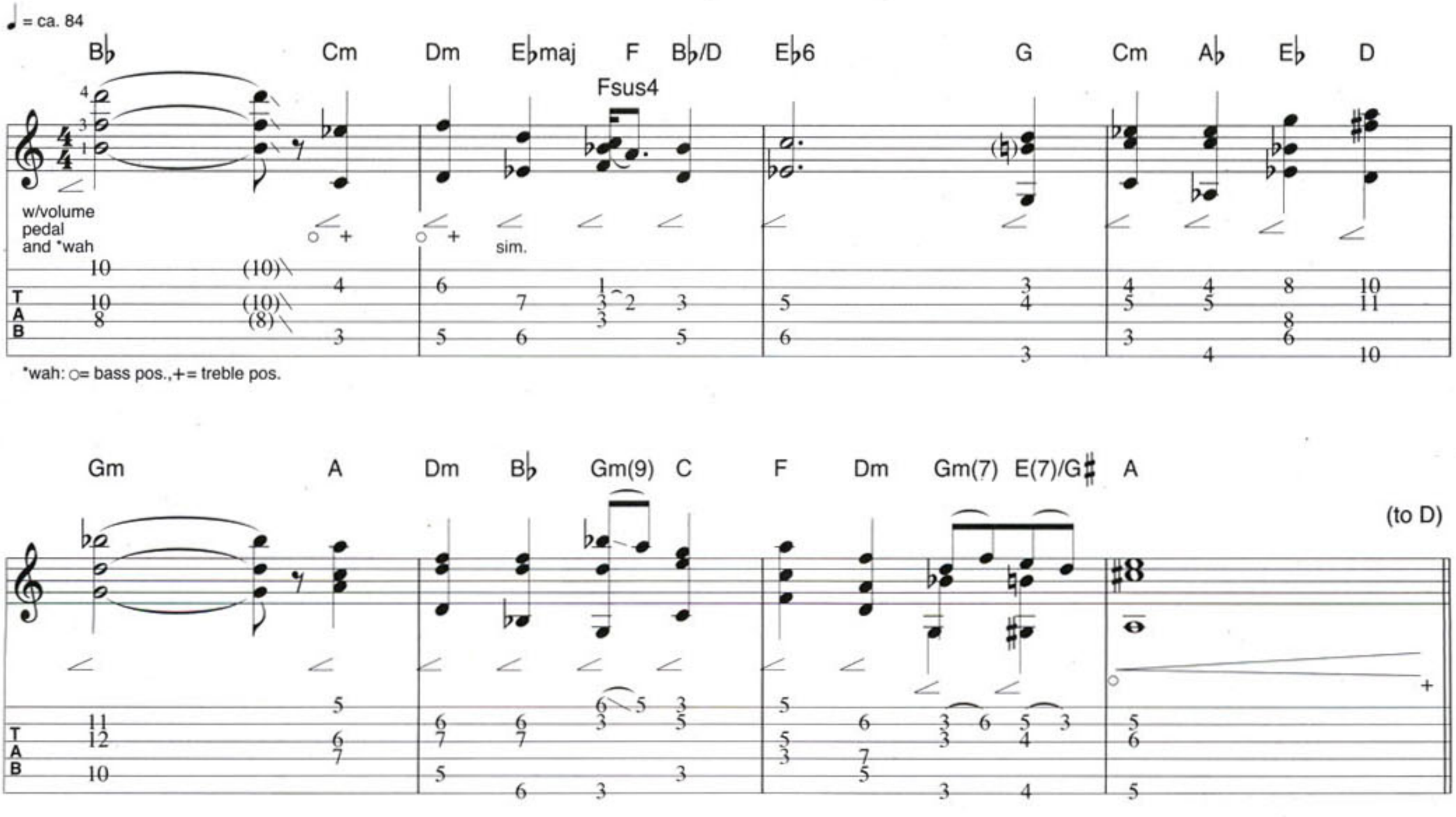
10 WRITE SONGS WITHIN SONGS

When composing, Morse sometimes includes radically diverse sections and interludes within a single piece, often to the point where it sounds like a completely different song. Case in point: the first interlude in the original version of "Cruise Control," where after several furious rounds of trading solos with Sloan and Lavitz, Morse unexpectedly drifts into the beautifully tranquil, Baroque-flavored, solo-guitar chord-melody as transcribed in Ex. 8. Arranged here for a single guitar, the tone of this lovely song within a song is shaped with a clean electric embellished with volume pedal swells and a subtle (auto-?) wah filter effect. If you discover a more comfy fingering, please have at it. Learn it well and serenade your sweetie to sleep. (Tip: While you're at it, you'll learn something about Baroque period modulations.) Smooth sailing and gracious thanks to Mister Steve!



Ex. 8



*wah: ○= bass pos.,+= treble pos.

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SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Free Fall

Night of the Living Dregs

Industry Standard

The Introduction

Stand Up

High Tension Wires

Southern Steel

Coast to Coast